Discussion Questions for *Whistling Vivaldi*

I. Steele writes that stereotype threat can often cause people to feel intense levels of anxiety that, through no fault of their own, can restrict a person from reaching his/her potential. In turn, feeling that you do not belong in a certain space can make it difficult for to remain in that setting, and to sustain your motivation to stay there. (p.111)

- Have you or someone close to you ever felt that you do not belong somewhere?
- What impact did that have and what would have helped to make you feel that you belong?
- How does segregation relate to underrepresentation?
- In hindsight, when could you have felt this way but didn’t – and what was the difference that made you buck the trend?

II. Claude Steele calls out segregation in U.S. society saying: “Segregation remains a major feature of American life. The 2000 census shows that the average White American lives in a neighborhood that is 80 percent white and 7 percent black while the average black American lives in a neighborhood that is 33 percent white and 51 percent black. This holds for suburbs as much as cities. What are the implications for students in our present day schools? People, though capable of making decisions and choices, do have a location in society; their lives are located somewhere in its social, economic, and cultural structures and in the networks of relationships that make up society. Being born into a low-income Appalachian family in the hills of Eastern Kentucky is to take life on from a different location in society’s opportunity structure than being born into a high-income family in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Different locations afford people different resources, different access to the “social capital” of skills, knowledge, opportunities, and life chances. Segregation affects location. When people are grouped or segregated on the basis of a characteristic like social class, race or religion, it affects the resources and social capital available to them.” (p.196)

- How do we see evidence of segregation-related issues operating in our local community? Within our university?
III. Claude Steele says that Whistling Vivaldi is about identity contingencies, or “the things you have to deal with because you have a given social identity, because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on. Generally speaking, contingencies are circumstances you have to deal with in order to get what you want or need in a situation.” (p.4)

- In what ways can we help members of the Princeton community to understand aspects that make up their own social identity (e.g. race, disability, social class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) as well as that of their peers and begin to not only move beyond them but see what the labels do to our interactions?

IV. At the center of Claude Steele’s book is the idea of stereotype threat. He writes, “As members of society we have a pretty good idea about a lot of things, including the major groups and identities in society. We could all take out a piece of paper, write down the major stereotypes of those identities, and show a high degree of agreement in what we wrote. This means that whenever we’re in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our identities could be applied—such as being old, poor, rich, or female—we know it...it is also a threat...And this means that it follows members of the stereotyped group into these situations like a balloon over their heads.” (p.5)

- Why do you think President Eisgruber selected this book for the whole Princeton community to read?
- How might social identity and stereotype threat influence how members of the community interact and how might this acknowledgement of stereotype threat affect the kind of resources or support services offered to members of the Princeton community?